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Sent: Fri 3/29/2013 1:51:41 PM
Subject: St. Louis Post-Dispatch - Editorial: Regulators demand a fix at foul-smelling Bridgeton landfill

Editorial: Regulators demand a fix at foul-smelling Bridgeton landfill

http://www.stltoday.com/news/opinion/editorial-regulators-demand-a-fix-at-foul-smelling-bridgeton-landfill/article_71e7338c-ae1d-54b1-a257-9e36a03b2079.html

May 29, 2013

The naysayers who complain that government regulators are job-killers and tax-suckers ought take a look at the case of the Bridgeton landfill.

Like a tale from a 1950's sci-fi mag, something deep in the bowels of the landfill began heaving and smoking and stinking more than two years ago.

It got worse in January when the subsurface fire intensified and the landfill began throwing off more heat and more stench.

A resident of a mobile park near the landfill said the smell was like rotten eggs and that it prevented him from sitting outside on his porch, which had cost him \$5,000 to build.

The company that operates the Bridgeton landfill, Republic Services, Inc. of Phoenix, said waste was decomposing faster than normal and that it was working to upgrade the gas management system. Neighbors saw no improvement. Or smelled any, either.

Meanwhile, temperatures in a section of the landfill had reached 190 degrees and a 40-foot section of ground had collapsed. A spokeswoman for Republic said that all landfills settle as they decompose and that there was nothing to be alarmed about.

Easy to say if you live in Phoenix and the belching landfill is in Bridgeton.

Kathleen Logan Smith, director of environmental policy at the Missouri Coalition for the Environment put it like this: "With these kinds of sites, the companies seek to delay, delay, delay."

Republic says it has been spending millions of dollars to address the problem. The company is drilling for new gas collection wells, which it says could temporarily worsen the foul smell emanating from the landfill.

The 52-acre Bridgeton Sanitary Landfill is at 13570 St. Charles Rock Road, immediately north of Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. The landfill was permitted in 1985 and stopped

taking waste in 2004.

Part of the concern about what's taking place below the ground is that the landfill is next to the West Lake Landfill, a federal Superfund site where radioactive wastes from World War II were dumped 40 years ago. The Environmental Protection Agency says the landfill's fire is 1,200 feet from the radioactive material.

Last month, the state Department of Natural Resources conducted some air quality tests at the site. The test determined that although unpleasant, the noxious odor was not a health hazard. This is good to know, but if the air was pumped through the DNR's fancy new "green building" in Jefferson City, people would have turned green, too.

The DNR then ordered Republic to pay for the air tests and notified the company that the odor is a public nuisance and a violation of state law. Last week, DNR asked Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster to get involved.

On Wednesday, Mr. Koster swung into action with full media-event guns blazing, announcing he was suing Republic in St. Louis County Circuit Court.

Mr. Koster said that while he had been assured Republic has a remediation plan that is being implemented as speedily as possible, he wanted to be sure that promise is "binding and enforceable in a court of law."

"For St. Louisans who have not been directly exposed to the site, it is difficult to describe the effects this situation is having on local neighborhoods and businesses," Mr. Koster noted.

He said the lawsuit is also intended to make sure that Republic — and not taxpayers — pay for the experts DNR has hired to perform ongoing and intensive environmental testing at the site. DNR says it will share the results of such tests with the public as soon as possible.

Mr. Koster's suit also seeks to provide remedies for local residents and businesses that have had to cope with the ongoing effects of the burning waste.

Without regulators like the DNR, the EPA and the Department of Health and Human Services, which analyzed the air samples, who knows how long the problem at the closed landfill could have gone on. Market-based solutions can take a while, particularly as the landfill is no longer producing revenue.

If the regulators hadn't given Mr. Koster the data needed to pursue a lawsuit, there's no telling when or if Republic Services would have gotten around to a solution.

Next time you feel like complaining about useless government regulations, drive out to Bridgeton take a whiff.

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